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The voyage into dweebishness

BY JIM CARROLL

Any marketing executive worth their Guccis should have an in-depth understanding of a wide range of digital technologies in order to better serve their clients

I'm typing this article on a Linux computer located near my exercise bike, using a word processor called ABIWord and surrounded by a half-dozen computer servers and a mish-mash of routers and network hubs. The fact is, I use a lot of leading-edge technology. You could say I'm a bit of a geek, and I'm darned proud of it.

Indeed, I've mastered a tremendous amount of technology over the years. I've done this because of my insatiable curiosity as to the way things work, and to better understand leading digital technology issues–information that directly feeds into my books and speeches, and helps save me money.

I think my experience is instructive for anyone working hard to ensure their success in tomorrow's business world. Executives with good business skills are a dime a dozen. Executives with good business skills and geek insight are worth their weight in gold.

Consider my recently mastered skill of digital video editing. As a keynote speaker, I'm finding more demand for my time in the U.S. and it's a different market south of the border. Unlike Canada, most people looking to book speakers want a promo video first. I was quoted $5,000 to $10,000 to have such a thing done, which immediately drove me to figuring out how to do it myself. Today, I've mastered the art of digital video production: I have an editing suite based on Windows 2000 that features 130 gigs of hard disk space, firewire in/out and ULead Media Studio Pro. I can do here at home what pros on Avids can do downtown.

Cost savings? By all means, even though I've plowed more than $5,000 into the system, it has paid off in spades. I just cut another video this morning–which pokes fun at dot-com insanity–to send off to my various U.S. speakers' bureaus. Having a regular stream of fresh material available to them helps me win business. If I had to rely on others, I'd be shelling out cash each time I needed a new video.

Sure, I'm saving money and having fun, but another important issue is at work here. By mastering digital technology, I'm better positioned as an expert. When I talk and write about the issue of online video and broadcasting, I know of what I speak. That, perhaps, is the most important thing that can come from a voyage into dweebishness. Any marketing executive worth their Guccis should have an in-depth understanding of a wide range of digital technologies in order to better serve their clients. If they don't, then as they make their way further into the world of digital marketing, the fact that they are faking it will quickly become apparent.

The need to blend executive skills with technological insight isn't new. Way back in 1986, when I read the now-out-of-print book *Competing in Time: Using Telecommunications for Strategic Advantage*, by Peter G.W. Keen, I was blown away. At the time, I had already been online for five years. But I was kind of stumbling about, working as a chartered accountant with technology in a CA firm that didn't understand its relevance. But this book crystallized things for me. Suddenly here was someone talking about how to make a strategic impact on business through tools such as e-mail and early Internet "stuff."

One particular sentence in that book caught my attention and has stayed with me to this day: "Creating an organizational strategy for telecommunications requires a new style of business thinking among senior managers, who must also have some insights into the key aspects of the technology itself." Change "telecommunications" to "marketing" or anything else, and you've got a good catchphrase for the digital revolution. People need to geekify themselves if they are to really succeed.

As our marketing world becomes more reliant on digital technologies, those who thrive will have paid more attention to technology than simple lip service. Here's a good way to think about it: Give me two creative directors, only one of whom has their own personal Web site, and I'll bet that's the one who will really succeed in the future. Why? Because the person who fools around with this stuff is simply going to do a better job in the long run.

My advice for those of you who are wavering on the technology fence? Run, don't walk, and get yourself a copy of the new MacroMedia DreamWeaver 4. It's the tool of choice for many professional Web designers. And we common folk can learn how to use it too. Sit down and commit yourself to learning the program inside and out and create a Web site on your own.

The reason? Mastering a program such as this will provide you far more insight into some of the technological issues related to digital marketing than any other one thing you might do. That doesn't mean you don't need all the other skills–creativity, imagination, drive. I'm just suggesting that if you really want to learn how to thrive and prosper in the world of digital marketing, you have to geekify yourself.

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